

150 years of Christian Brother/Edmund Rice Education in Belfast

A Mass to commemorate the arrival of the Christian Brothers in Belfast 150 years ago was celebrated in St Mary's Church, Chapel Lane on 12th November 2016. Bishop Noel Treanor presided at the mass and Bishop Patrick Walsh was the main celebrant. The homily was given by the Reverend Tim Bartlett. All three are former pupils of Christian Brothers schools.



The mass was attended by pupils from all of the current Edmund Rice Schools in Belfast.



This was followed by a reception and exhibition in the Westcourt Centre, Barrack Street illustrating the contribution of the Christian Brothers and the Edmund Rice Schools Trust to education in Belfast. A new mural incorporating the Edmund Rice icon, and symbolising the work of the centre was unveiled.



One hundred and fifty years ago on 12th November 1866 four Christian Brothers arrived in Belfast to begin teaching in St Mary's in Divis Street. The Brothers had been invited by Dr Patrick Dorrian, Bishop of Down and Connor, to educate the working class and 'ragged' children of this heavily populated area of Belfast where housing conditions were overcrowded and poverty rife. The Brothers came with a reputation as exceptional teachers who had dedicated their lives to the Rule established by their founder Blessed Edmund Rice. They worked tirelessly with a belief in the transforming and emancipating powers of education. Such was their impact in St Mary's that they were asked to take on teaching responsibilities in St Patrick's in Donegall Street, and four more Brothers arrived there on 27th November 1867.

A third school, St Malachy's, was opened in Oxford Street in 1874. The cost of the site and the building, £2,400, was a bequest from a Mrs McGill who wished to have the children of dockers, sailors and those people who worked the barges educated by the Christian Brothers in a location close to the Quays. 'Oxford Street', as it was commonly referred to, honoured the intentions of its generous benefactor and served that area well.

In 1900 Technical Education was promoted by the Belfast Corporation and the Brothers successfully applied for funding which they used to establish the Hardinge Street 'Trade School' in 1903. The curriculum that was primarily designed to prepare pupils for careers in industry, engineering and building, included Woodwork, Metalwork and Technical Drawing as well as English, Mathematics, Science, a Modern Language and Religious Education. Results were

outstanding and in 1915 a first place was achieved in Chemistry in an all-Ireland examination and there were state exhibitions in Mathematics, Science and Literature.

These successes in Hardinge Street led to increasing demands for places to the point where enrolment requests were exceeding capacity. Edmund Rice had foresightedly impressed upon his confreres the importance of being prepared for change. Recognising the need for another secondary level school to equip young men for careers in the professions the Brothers opened St Mary's Grammar School in Barrack Street in 1929.

Once again, increasing demand for places, particularly after the 1947 Education Act, saw the school struggling with accommodation problems. Eventually a large site was acquired close to Airfield House on the Glen Road and a new school building for St Mary's C.B.G.S opened in 1968 with an intake of 1,320 pupils. The Barrack Street complex continued to be needed and its city centre location made it convenient for younger pupils travelling from other parts of the city and beyond. It continued to be used as a Junior school until it finally closed in 1998.

From the 1960's onwards the Brothers opened schools at:

St Aidan's Primary School, Whiterock Road
Edmund Rice Primary School, Pim Street
CBS Secondary School, Glen Road
Edmund Rice College, Hightown Road
Gort na Mona CBS, Dermot Hill
Park Lodge, Antrim Road

and the new Edmund Rice Schools Trust schools:

John Paul II Primary School, Whiterock Road
St Patrick's Primary School, Antrim Road.

In 1999 the Brothers initiated a new project called The Open Doors Learning Centre to meet the needs of young people who, due to their specific circumstances, were not attending mainstream education. With the closure of the Junior school at Barrack Street in 1998, the Open Doors project moved into the building. From 1999-2014 the project helped young people to deal with social, emotional and behavioural problems whilst continuing with a learning plan appropriate to their age and ability.

The premises at Barrack Street have been fully restored and refurbished. It is now called the Westcourt Centre and is supported by the Congregation of Christian Brothers Northern Ireland. Units in the complex provide accommodation for projects whose purpose is primarily educational including the Edmund Rice Schools Trust, The Link Centre Secondary Pupil Support Service, the Belfast Hospital School and the Andersonstown Music School.

Westcourt also runs its own projects providing transformational education along social justice lines. Recent and ongoing work includes Parenting Support, Drugs and Alcohol Education, Suicide Awareness Training and Advocacy Initiatives around Homelessness as well as providing facilities and meeting space for other charitable and community groups.

The last section of the premises to be refurbished was formally opened and named the Edmund Rice Annex by Brother Edmund Garvey on 12th November 2016 as part of the 150th Anniversary celebrations of the Christian Brothers arrival in Belfast.

